

The Máien: A Women's Secret Society on San Francisco Bay

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The Coast Miwok Indians of northern California were once a hunting and gathering people who lived on the northern shore of San Francisco Bay, and along the Pacific coast north of the Golden Gate. One of several California Penutian languages, Miwok consisted of several contiguous groups, the Bay, Plains, and Sierra Miwok, and two geographically discreet groups, the Lake and Coast Miwok. Along with the language of the Ohlone (also known as the Costanoan), Miwok formed the Utian family of the Penutian linguistic stock.

The earliest description of the Coast Miwok probably appeared in the journal of Francis Fletcher, an English sailor who accompanied Sir Francis Drake in his 1579 visit to the northern California coast. Following Drake's visit, no Europeans are known to have observed the Coast Miwok again until the arrival of the Spanish explorers in the late 18th century. Spanish missions were quickly established at San Francisco (1776), San Jose (1797), and San Rafael (1817), with subsequent Coast Miwok baptisms occurring at each. The missionization of the Coast Miwok began in their southern territory about 1801, and gradually spread northward. By 1822, the entire group had been subjected to the Hispanic conquest.

Following secularization in 1834, many of the Coast Miwok neophytes who had survived the missionization process returned to live in their native territory. Several post-secularization villages, such as *Echa-Tamal*, were established in the heart of Coast Miwok territory. A very important village, *Olompali*, continued its existence from the pre-Hispanic period through the Mission period and into the post-secularization era. Throughout the remainder of the 19th century, the surviving Coast Miwok people gradually assimilated into the dominant Euro-American culture, blended into the Mexican American community, or else left the area entirely.

Whereas there had been about 3000 Coast Miwok people at the time of historic contact (c. 1800 A.D.), by 1906 there were only 25 Native Americans (of all tribal affiliations) residing in Coast Miwok territory (Cook 1956; Kelsey 1971:1). During the 1920s-1930s, Isabel Kelly interviewed Tomás Comtechal (also known as Tom Smith) and Maria Copa Frías, whom she considered to be two of the last traditional speakers of the Coast Miwok language (Kelly 1991). By the 1940s, it was thought that no one remained who was familiar with either the Coast Miwok language or culture. After the creation of the reconstructed Coast Miwok village of *Kule Loklo* at Point Reyes National Seashore in the 1970s, it slowly became apparent that local people who traced their ancestry to the Coast Miwok still existed. Many of these people had intermarried with the Kashaya and Southern Pomo. Today, people of Coast Miwok ancestry are included with the Pomo in the Federated Indians of Graton Rancheria, a Federally-recognized tribal organization.

Much of what remains today of the old-time Coast Miwok is found in their archaeological record and a precious few ethnographies and ethnohistoric accounts. From these limited sources, however, certain insights into the native lifeways of these people might be obtained. An example is the story of the *máien*, both a female chief as well as a female secret society fundamental in the maintenance of Coast Miwok society.

The Coast Miwok were divided into several small nations consisting of one or more large villages and several smaller villages. Although Kelly (1978:419) felt that there was no overall tribal organization, the accounts of the Fletcher journal, as well as the oral history of Camillo Ynitia's family indicate otherwise (Carlson and Parkman 1986; Robert Thomas, personal communication 1981). The Coast Miwok were organized according to membership in either the Land (*yówa*) or Water (*líwa*) moieties. Every large village had a male chief called *hóypuh*. The *hóypuh* position was a Miwok tradition, being found also among the Lake and Sierra Miwok (Callahan 1965, 1978:268; Kroeber 1925:452) and probably among the Bay and Plains Miwok as well. The chief's position was not necessarily hereditary and it lacked major responsibilities. According to Kelly (1978:419), the *hóypuh*, "...took care of the people, offered advice, and harangued them daily."

In addition to the male chief, the Coast Miwok had two female leaders. The first was called *hóypuh kulé(·)yih* ("woman chief"). This woman took charge of the Acorn and *Sunwele* Dances, and was greatly involved in the Bird Cult.

The second female leader was called *máien*.

The second female leader (*máien*) was a genuinely key person: "*máien* bosses everyone, even *hóypuh*" (TC). Theoretically, she was head of the ceremonial house and *hóypuh* was head of the mixed dance house, "but *máien* did all the work." She bossed construction of a new dance house; had wood hauled for festivals; superintended preparation of fiesta food; sent out invitation sticks for dances, and, in some cases, selected the performers (Kelly 1978:419).

Like the *hóypuh*, the position of *máien* also occurred among the Lake and Sierra Miwok and probably the Bay and Plains Miwok as well. Among the Lake and Sierra Miwok, the *máien* position might be held by either a born chieftainess or the wife of a chief (Callaghan 1978:268; Kroeber 1925:425). Among the Hill Patwin, the woman dance captain was called “*mayin*” and considered to be the “queen” (Kelly 1991:349). Among the Coast Miwok, the *máien* was often the wife of a certain shaman, called *wál·ipoh*.²

If the memory of Tomas Comtechal is to be trusted, the selection of a new *máien* took place following the dance for the investiture of a new *wál·ipoh* “doctor.” He chose the “best looking girl...the best dancer.” She accompanied him to the hills for two days and two nights, during which time she was thought to die and return to life, as the *wál·ipoh* himself already had done (Kelly 1978:419).³

As evidenced by the Miwok ethnographies, there was one *máien* for every major village, with the woman often being married to either the *hóypuh* or the *wál·ipoh*. In actuality, it appears that *máien* represented membership in a female secret society as well as a singular position of leadership of the women’s ceremonial house. This membership is reflected in the names of many of the Native women baptized at San Francisco Bay area missions during the time of Spanish occupation. The nominal suffix “-*máien*” (alternate spellings *maen*, *mayen*, *mayenu*, *mayin*, *meyen*) is attached to the names of up to 30% of the females of the northern San Francisco Bay area. The distribution of the *máien* consisted of a geometric arc around the northern and eastern shores of San Francisco Bay. If the nominal suffix “-*maye*” is also taken to indicate *máien* membership, then the organization had an even greater distribution through Ohlone territory. There was apparently no age requirement for membership in this female secret society.

Relatively little is known of the *máien* as a secret society. From the ethnographic and ethnohistoric fragments that survive of Coast Miwok society, though, some clues can be detected regarding the nature and significance of the *máien* organization. First, membership does not appear to have been hereditary. A common membership in *máien* was held by some but not all mothers and daughters. It is probable that *máien* membership was passed from mother to daughter in some families, with membership being obtained by achievement in others. Between 1816-1818, ten different *máien* from the Coast Miwok village of *Olompali* were baptized at Mission San Jose de Guadalupe.⁴ It did not depend on moiety affiliation. Secret society membership and its overall purpose are explained by Bean and Vane (1978:665):

Membership in the societies was conferred upon chosen young people on the basis of birth and achievement, but there was a tendency for membership to run in families, often passed ambilineally, a possible indication that the secret societies were used to strengthen affinal relationships and thus constitute intervillage alliances.

The explicit purposes of the secret societies varied. In some areas the initiation of young people and their training seems to have been a major stated goal; in others the goal was “world renewal,” first-fruits recognition, curing, or initiation of economic activities appropriate to the time of the year.

A second observation concerning *máien* membership is that it entailed a certain status within the native community. Such status was probably expressed in both the social and ceremonial worlds. Kelly’s (1978:421) reference to a Coast Miwok girl’s first menses reveals some of the status afforded a *máien* member:

If, at first menses, a girl already belonged to the dance house (secret society), she informed the *máien* of her condition and remained with her four days. A nonmember stayed home, usually in a small, conical hut.

Status of a more ceremonial nature might be detected in Kelly’s description of the initiation ceremony conducted for Coast Miwok boys:

Prior to this dance, four human effigies – three male, one female – were made of clay. They were about a foot tall and were dried and clothed. Said to represent “dead relations,” all the figures belonged to the Land “home” and from the boys’ rite took its name of *?u·ti kanká(·)wul* “they dance the child (doll).” Before the boys danced, four women, each clasping a clay figure, entered the ceremonial house through the smoke hole and danced with the “dolls.” They danced again the fourth night, after which the effigies were left outside to disintegrate (Kelly 1978:421).

That the four female dancers were *máien* is conjectural on my part, yet seemingly plausible when the entire initiation ceremony is examined.

Although giving an outward appearance of being a male-dominated society, the Coast Miwok world was probably strongly influenced by its female community. The *máien*, both individually and collectively, were probably the most influential of all the women. Furthermore, the *máien* as woman chief appears to have been much more powerful than the *hóyphuh* himself (Kelly 1991:348).

Although the boys’ initiation ceremony was basically a male tribal rite, there was a very strong female presence throughout it. The presence of the female community, probably manifested in the *máien*, is also observed in the Coast Miwok political world. In discussing the training of a new *hóyphuh*, Kelly (1978:419) states that, “The old chief and four elderly women tutored an incipient headman; and when the successor was ready to take over, the incumbent withdrew or a poisoner was hired to liquidate him.” In other accounts, it was the four old women alone who chose and trained the new *hóyphuh* and then had the old *hóyphuh* killed by poisoning (Kelly 1991:347). It might be conjectured once again that the four old women were *máien* and that they were the real political power in the Coast Miwok world.

That the *máien* were responsible for sending out the invitations for dances also indicates this hidden political power. The Coast Miwok were the co-inventors of the clam disk bead currency which revolutionized the native economy of central California during the proto-historic period. The presence of the *máien* among not only the Coast Miwok, but also the Bay Miwok, Hill Patwin, and Ohlone, suggests an intertribal alliance which probably functioned in part to stabilize the economic activities of the native communities. These four groups, spread around San Francisco Bay, occupied the areas most central to the flow of trade in central California. With the *máien*'s carefully planned schedule of trade feasts and exchanges, an economic equilibrium was maintained around San Francisco Bay. This resulted in not only the smooth transfer of trade materials from one nation to another, but also in the relatively peaceful nature of Native California at the time of historic contact. In fact, that peaceful nature may have led to a decline in military training and awareness, a change that benefited the Euro-American conquerors of the 18th and 19th centuries.

The Coast Miwok, like all the native people of the San Francisco Bay area, considered Coyote to be the "creator of life." Often associated with society's female community, Coyote was viewed as the fertility necessary to insure the perpetuation of society. It is interesting to note that the word *máien* may have come from the northern Ohlone (Chochenyo) word for coyote, *mayan* (Harrington 1921).⁵ Old Man Coyote of mythology gave his children their culture and good life. Perhaps through the efforts of his female namesakes, the culture and good life that characterized Native California were long and well maintained.

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¹ This is a slightly revised version of my earlier paper entitled, "The Máien" (*National Women's Anthropology Newsletter* 5(2):16-22. Hayward, California. 1981).

² The wife of the *wál'ipoh*, herself a *máien*, may have served as the head of the women's secret society.

³ In this sense, going "to the hills" is another way of saying that one has left the confines of community and entered the wilderness where individual power might be had (Parkman 1994). Similarly, "to die and return to life" is a metaphorical reference to becoming a shaman. The *máien* was capable of communicating with the supernatural world but rarely did so due to her administrative duties (Kelly 1991:349).

⁴ These names appear in the mission's register: Chonchonmayen (#3326, a 26-year old female); Cholameyen (#3412, an 8-year old female); Tanalmayen (#3435, a 14-year old female); Uenumayé (#3460, a 28-year old female); Zaquenmayen (#3461, a 22-year old female); Ouocmayen (#3483, a 25-year old female); Uenumeyer (#3521, a 54-year old female); Uyumayen (#3522, a 46-year old female); Ozacamagen (*máien?*) (#3550, a 60-year old female); and Ochchemayen (#3551, a 40-year old female) (Slaymaker 1972: Table 1). Other *máien* from *Olompali* who were baptized at local missions included Vainmayen, Tolemayen, Ochohemayen, Elamaen, and Geiumaen. Other *Olompali* names found in the mission registers such as Tabalmae, Huiumaie, and Uenumaye may also have been *máien*.

⁵ The ethnographic territory of the Coast Miwok covered all of modern-day Marin County. According to legend, the word "Marin" is derived from a Chief Marin, a mission-era Coast Miwok resistance leader (Cleaveland 1957). However, it is possible that Marin is another version of the word *máien*.